

Peter Gomes, Minister of Memorial Church at Harvard and Plummer Professor of Christian Morals in the University will retire after a brilliant 39 year career in Cambridge. Peter is renowned as a writer, teacher and preacher; recipient of 40 honorary degrees; one of the truly great preachers of our time. It is Peter's practice to address each graduating class at Harvard's commencement exercises. As these graduates prepare to leave academia for the big, wide world, their commencement (commencing to **be** in the world) is akin to our commemoration this day—the Feast of the Ascension. Falling on the 40th day after the resurrection and always a weekday, we have transferred this lesser known feast of the church to this Sunday, the Sunday after the Ascension.

In gathering the disciples one last time before he ascends to the Father, Jesus challenges the disciples to live into their newfound wisdom, perspective and faith. He invites them to embody their intimate and life-changing understanding of the faithfulness of God to take it into the world as “newly-graduated” disciples. As they turn away from the physical presence of Jesus and turn towards the world, they commence being “on their own” for the second time in their lives.

Lurking in their minds is the remembrance of their doubt and bewilderment overwhelming them in the aftermath of Jesus' crucifixion and death on the cross. Unprepared for the emotional upheaval of his death (even though Jesus had attempted to prepare them for that time and again), on this occasion scripture says the disciples are infused with such joy they continually (the literal meaning is, *through everything*) bless God.

From the deafening silence of the crucifixion to this wondrous day of Ascension, the disciples have, as if in a time-frame not unlike the academic year of educational institutions, matured, grown in wisdom, understanding, and perspective; deepened in their faith in Jesus, and are now prepared to take their newly rekindled hope into the world. The one thing lacking for them at this moment is the infusion of the Holy Spirit which will equip them to meet every all challenges to come. That charisma, or grace as we know it, will be bestowed by God this next Sunday, the Feast of Pentecost.

In all his commencement addresses Peter has offered to graduates of the university, their families and friends essentially the same advice and counsel. (Parenthetically, and without wanting to embarrass her, there is a member of this congregation who has been invited to address the graduating class of the school in which she teaches.) With that in mind, I invite this congregation to contemplate what we would say to the students were we invited to address the class? Would you challenge or cajole? Would we find ourselves pleading and even “preaching”? Would we attempt to stir up in them something new, or rekindle feelings of the past, perhaps humor to guide them along their way? The challenge is significant and meaningful—what would we say as meaningful for the rest of their lives?

In his remarkable way, the Rev Dr. Peter Gomes finds the words and feelings within which he shapes his message around each graduating class, citing and calling to minds the times, events as well as sorrows and joys shared in their four years at University. In one of his addresses, Peter offered this admonition: **Think small, act large.**

Inviting the students to “**think small**”, Peter did not mean that the graduates should be small minded, or petty, or parochial. Rather he meant for those students to focus their ambitions on those things about which they could do something—namely themselves, as well as those things over which they had control: their temper, their manners, their morals, their habits, their souls. Peter quoted Lord Chesterfield: *We do not need the learned man to teach us the important things. We all know the important things, though we all violate and neglect them. The greatest dilemma is life is to fail to do something little that you could do because you were waiting to do something heroic you couldn't do. Think small and get the job done, beginning with yourself.*

The second thing with which Peter challenged that graduating class was to **Act Large**. Another way of saying this was that Peter invited those graduates to act generously. He invited the class to be *extravagant* in their expectations, *lavish* in their love, *ambitious* in their aspirations especially for the well-being of others. As Bill Coffin, the chaplain at Yale once said, *Love measures our stature: the more we love, the bigger we are. There is no smaller package in all the world than of a man all wrapped up in himself.*

This living large and extravagantly in the world was exactly what Nelson Mandela, the one-time President of South Africa, imprisoned for 27 years before the multi-racial democratization of the country, meant when he said: *You are a child of God; your playing small doesn't serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God within us. It is not just in some of us, it is in everyone and as we let our own light shine we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear our presence automatically liberates others.*"

As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence (our hope, our joy, our faith) liberates others.

Our theme this day in which we remember the Ascension of Jesus and his charge to the disciples as he prepares to leave them in the world is to remember, re-enact, reinvigorate, and renew all that Jesus has given to us to live with *in the world*. There is a powerful story at the very core of our lives. It is the story of the love of God, poured out for the world. Because so many of us are consumed with our own little lives, we do not see, nor hear, nor understand this crucial story. Thinking small and acting large is to "translate" that story through our own personal stories.

The deep truth is how that story—awakened in our minds, memories and aspirations—comes to life in the everyday—comes to life in such a way that we know it and believe it and live it that we, in turn, pass it on to our children as the deepest, most profound truth of all life.

One of my favorite poets—T.S. Eliot—once crafted words by which this story, so often told, is the essential core of all our lives. He has said in The Four Quartets,

*You say I am repeating
Something I have said before. I shall say it again.
Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there,
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way
. . . .(of) what you do not know
You must go by way of ignorance,
. . . .
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.
.*

*The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility: Humility is endless. . . .

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from. . . .

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

On this Feast of the Ascension as Jesus sends his disciples out into the unknown, they will learn what they do not know—which is the love of God as they “think small and act large.” As they discovered the truth of this paradoxical aspect of life—that God is where we think God is not, we will find as do graduates of all times, that we are more than we think we are, how else could we keep on discovering we are more than we believed ourselves to be in Christ.